A former student leader, now Research Officer of the Queensland Trades and Labor Council, discusses the motivations of student and worker action for preservation and extension of democratic rights.

SO OFTEN in our society one hears people, whether they be trade unionists or students, talk about their rights. The worker insists on his right to strike, the student of his basic right to dissent. However to believe that such rights exist independent of a latent or real power to protect them is a dangerous illusion. Throughout Queensland history trade unionists have struggled to achieve a power position which would establish their right to form associations to fight for a more efficient planning and equal distribution of wealth. This socialist conception has been met with the combined economic and therefore political power of the people who have owned or managed the wealth of the land.

The employers have used many weapons to deny workers their industrial rights to economic justice. At times when the unions were weak they have not hesitated to use the full power of the State apparatus, i.e., violence, on which this power rests. Thus in Barcaldine in the 1890's the army, militia and police were used and the strike leaders jailed at Rockhampton. In 1912, in the Brisbane strike when unions were still fighting for recognition of their right to exist, unionists were met in Albert Street with fixed bayonets. In 1918 at Cairns in the famous Red Flag Riots, the police opened fire on demonstrators wounding 16.

Since then of course the employers have, on the promise of its dual interest nature, set up the Conciliation and Arbitration system as a legal front and a buffer to emasculate trade unions, so that they do not have to show the real nature of their power position, which rests on control of the state apparatus and of the mass media. In the early days of trade unionism, workers were aware that the suppression of industrial rights involved in almost all cases a suppression of civil rights. The right to earn a living is certainly a civil right. At times when workers have been strug-
gling for their right to exist or for social justice their leaders have been jailed, intimidated, victimized.

Today however, and especially in the 1967 Civil Liberties struggle, I think it would be true to say that not many unionists saw the connection between industrial and civil liberty. This seems strange only two years after Mt. Isa when union leaders under Nicklin’s emergency laws were denied almost all civil liberties. A paper I gave at the 1967 Trades and Labor Council Congress on the theme “Industrial and Civil liberty are Inseparable” was received well by the leadership; however, many rank and file, still reading the Courier-Mail, assume that they are living in the most sophisticated democracy in the world.

The need to dissent usually arises when an issue portrays the gap between the premises of one’s society and the contradictions of these premises in action. Such an issue is the Vietnam war.

Students in Queensland had not played much of a role in the political development in that State. In 1965 when the Country-Liberal Coalition was denying basic civil liberties to unionists at Mt. Isa, some students were just beginning to be actively concerned with Aborigines. Very few, even today would have had much knowledge of the industrial and political history of Queensland. Few would know of the famous 1948 Railway strike, the bashing of Fred Paterson, the threats of machine-gunning, and the jailing of strike leaders. However, this is not unusual in an institution made up of children from middle class families. Their interest in social justice in the community was, and probably still is, negligible. In the 1940’s the students had rallied in the parliamentary galleries to rubbish the government then trying to change the University Act to allow the State more control over tertiary development. The Cold War forced them into the classification of the children of light.

Algeria was of no concern to them; Cuba saw them supporting Kennedy’s dogmatism; Sharpeville outraged a minority, and Vietnam has managed to shake only a few. In Queensland Vietnam has been the motivating issue, to some, mostly middle class, students who have progressively developed from a belief that it was one aberration of the system, to an understanding that the capitalist system is in fact suppressing human needs. The extension of the critical analysis came when they were refused the right to dissent over Australia’s policy of supporting counter-revolution in Asia. They mumbled about their rights as they repeatedly went off to the watch-house, were intimidated and sometimes bashed. Some then realized how powerless they really were, that in Queensland people had relinquished their right to dissent, and that the
struggle for the small power of demonstrating and placarding had to begin.

With a massive education campaign about Queensland’s Bill of Rights—the Traffic Acts—students were moved on this value issue. The hypocrisy of the Nicklin Government was clearly established and students from all political and religious philosophies supported the struggle. Nearly all university clubs except the D.L.P. actively supported it, the issue causing as well a split in the Liberal club, dividing into the real small “1” liberals and the Conservatives, who since Menzies’ time have used the term Liberal.

I believe so many students became interested in the issue because it was a value issue. Students as yet are not interested in issues of material necessity and material justice, they are interested in issues of freedom.

The militant section of the Students’ Society for Democratic Action stressed the importance of building student power. The need to develop their media, their communication with other potential powerful groups, teachers, technical training students, trade unionists. Their belief that only through a display of strength would aims be achieved was rewarded, surprisingly to some, by the removal of the permit fee. Not much but surprisingly quickly for many militants who thought it would take longer than the one march.

This year the militants won through again when, on Friday, 26th March, over 100 marched from the university to the U.S. Consulate, in an anti-Vietnam march putting into practice the union submission by not applying for a permit for a footpath procession or demonstration. They got through mainly because they believe the Government feared further large demonstrations on civil liberties.

The militants realize that the right to dissent effectively in Queensland is being protected by student power, still badly organised, and that such rights will only survive if some organised section of the community rises against abuses in the system. I think the depressing thing about the students’ and even the trade unionists’ position, is that they see no connection between the suppression of civil liberties and the intervention against the N.L.F. in Vietnam. Most students of Liberal, Country even Labor Party beliefs, felt it was only one aberration of an otherwise fulfilling system. That is not the analysis of the Society for Democratic Action. Civil liberties are suppressed by governments con-
cerned over too effective debate on issues which they know are damaging to their power position.

If the facts on Vietnam could be effectively put to the people of Australia, their position as aggressors against genuine social revolution would be clearly outlined. The S.D.A. students have come out of the struggle with more political sophistication. Their aim is now to attempt to analyse the dichotomies of their society in the fields of social justice, education, civil liberties, foreign policy and to show students and trade unionists that the present economic and political power arrangements of our society are geared to the suppression of the genuine needs both material and spiritual of the people of Australia.

SCIENCE TODAY

... using any reasonable definition of a scientist, we can say that 80 to 90 percent of all the scientists that have ever lived are alive now.

... the crude size of science in manpower or in publications tends to double within a period of 10 to 15 years

One of the things I think is happening is the maturing of a certain responsible attitude among scientists analogous to that which, in almost prehistoric times, moved physicians toward the concept of the Hippocratic Oath. Contrary to popular belief, this happened not because doctors were unusually dedicated or public-spirited people but because they were all too easily held personally responsible by their customers for poison, malpractice, and so on. The scientist has had a much harder time in arriving at this, for his customer has usually been the state rather than an individual. His guilt has been in the eyes of the world rather than those of an individual.

In Great Britain and the United States very few of the senators, congressmen, members of Parliament, and active politicians—less than 3 percent, in fact—have had any training in science or technology. Among deputies in the Supreme Council of the U.S.S.R., the figure now exceeds 25 percent, and though their machinery of government is very different from ours, I take this as an indication of the way our own future may lie.

Scientists have hardly yet begun to realise that they hold in their hands a great deal of power that they have hardly used. The ranks of senior scientists and key administrators of science have now swelled to the point where I think it will not be long before some of the good ones begun to enter politics rather more forcibly. We need such men, on the national scene and on the international scene. We need them for the internal reconstruction of the entire social fabric of science and for the external problems of science in the service of man.